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Hammond and Letterman: A Tale of Two Men Who Changed Army Medicine

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Once upon a time there were two Army Medical Department officers who revolutionized military medicine not only in the United States but also worldwide. One of them was Jonathan A. Letterman, Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac; his many reforms of battlefield medicine eventually formed what became known as the “Letterman System.” The other was William A. Hammond, the Army Surgeon General during the middle years of the Civil War, who was the catalyst for the overall revolution in Army medicine that included Letterman’s reforms.

The Army Medical Department entered the Civil War ill-prepared, poorly supplied, inadequately organized, and led by a corps of medical officers marked more by its stratification, dogmatism and dedication to custom than by its flexibility, innovation, knowledge of current medicine and science, and sound leadership. The selection in May 1861 of the senior Army medical officer, 64-year-old Clement A. Finley, as Surgeon General only confirmed that fundamental and much-needed change would not be coming to the Army Medical Department with the outbreak of the Civil War. This situation soon led concerned citizens to push for the establishment of the civilian U.S. Sanitary Commission in June 1861 to complement the Medical Department. The pathetic medical support provided to the Union forces at the Battle of Bull Run in July 1861 and the continuing poor medical care for the sick and wounded convinced the Sanitary Commission’s leaders to push harder for major reforms to improve the efficiency of the Army Medical Department. This commission had significant political influence with Congress and President Abraham Lincoln, and was able to convince the President and the Secretary of War to reorganize the Medical Department and select a new Surgeon General in April 1862. Succumbing to these civilian pressures in selecting the new Surgeon General, Lincoln went against the desires of his powerful and vindictive new Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, who would remember this reverse until revenge was his.

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On 25 April 1862, William A. Hammond, then a first lieutenant and Medical Inspector of camps and hospitals in the Department of Western Virginia, was promoted to brigadier general and to the post of The Surgeon General. His meteoric promotion over the heads of many medical officers who were years his senior gained him many opponents and few supporters within the senior leadership of the Medical Department.

Hammond was born in August 1828 and received his M.D. from the University of the City of New York in 1849. He served in the Army Medical Department from 1849 until October 1860, when he resigned to accept an appointment at the University of Maryland Medical School in Baltimore. An imposing figure at 6' 2" and 250 pounds, the energetic and capable Hammond returned to the Medical Department in May 1861 with the loss of his previous seniority. Intelligent, a solid medical researcher and prolific writer, dynamic and aggressive, and a gifted teacher and speaker, Hammond quickly became a dominating figure in an Army largely composed of medical midgets. He was initially assigned to serve as medical purveyor in Frederick, Maryland, and then to organize and run hospitals in Hagerstown, Frederick and Baltimore. In these posts, his efficiency, his conflicts with the Medical Department's leaders and entrenched bureaucrats, and his marked success in bringing order out of existing chaos brought Hammond to the attention of the leaders of the Sanitary Commission, who highly regarded his work.

Hammond's work also brought him to the attention of hide-bound Surgeon General Finley, who transferred him to the remote regions of the Department of Western Virginia to lessen his visibility. This may well have been the best thing that happened to the Army Medical Department in the Civil War, because it was here that Hammond met and worked with Jonathan A. Letterman, Medical Director in the Department of Western Virginia since January 1862. The two were soon working closely together. Based on a plan devised by Hammond, Letterman built one of the first pavilion hospitals at Parkersburg, West Virginia. Here, also, Letterman and Hammond worked with the department commander, Major General William Rosecrans, on the design of a new ambulance wagon that would become the Army standard.

With his appointment as Surgeon General, the 33-year-old Hammond immediately set about reforming the Medical Department from top to bottom. He broke the constricting bonds of custom and revolutionized the Army Medical Department. His innovations were many and significant, and they left an indelible mark on the Department for many years to come. He aggressively remade the existing systems of field medicine, medical supply, hospitals, medical personnel, and the command and control of medical services. Disregarding existing practices, Hammond selected medical directors for the field armies based on their competence rather than on their relative rank and connections. He then gave them the authority and independence they needed to carry out their missions. In the process he further alienated many of his more conservative regular and volunteer medical officers, especially when he banned the drug Calomel (a mercury compound used by many physicians that was causing more harm than good) from the medical chests in May 1863.

To staff the Surgeon General's Office and execute his program, Hammond brought in a number of medical officers who shared his reforming zeal. Now familiar with the quiet and thoughtful Jonathan Letterman's competence and capabilities, Hammond ordered him to Washington in May 1862 to be one of the Surgeon General's newly authorized medical inspectors. As Hammond and his staff began their labors, their attention was especially focused on the inadequate level of medical support being provided to the main Union forces of Major General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac, then engaged in the Peninsular Campaign. In June Charles Tripler, McClellan's medical director, requested reassignment. Without hesitation Hammond selected Letterman for this most crucial field medical post in the entire Union Army.

In choosing the 37-year-old Letterman, just a 13-year Army veteran, for such a demanding post, Hammond further smashed the traditions of selection and promotion by seniority rather than competence. Born in December 1824 and a March 1849 graduate of Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Jonathan Letterman was appointed an Assistant Surgeon in the Army Medical Department in June 1849. Letterman's extensive experience in numerous operations against various Indian tribes in Florida and the west during the 1850s taught him the importance of innovation and improvisation in treating and moving the wounded in the most difficult of conditions. These experiences prepared him very well for the huge challenges he would face.

Hammond gave Letterman his detailed letter of instruction as Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac on 19 June 1862. He told Letterman:

In making this assignment, I have been governed by what I conceive to be the best interests of the service. Your energy, determination, and faithful discharge of duty in all the different situations in which you have been placed during your service of thirteen years determined me to place you in the most arduous, responsible, and trying position you have yet occupied.

Hammond told Letterman to focus on the provision of proper and sufficient medical supplies, transportation, assuring the competency of the medical officers, selection and removal of medical personnel, and direct access to the Army's medical purveyors. He concluded:

And now, trusting to your possession of those qualities, without which I should never have assigned you to the duty, I commit to you the health, the comfort, and the lives of thousands of our fellow soldiers who are fighting for the maintenance of their liberties.

Hammond dispatched Letterman to McClellan with the promise of his full support and assistance—and he was good to his word. Within a week of Letterman's arrival at Harrison's Landing on the James River on 23 June 1862, he had surveyed the generally deplorable conditions confronting the Army Medical Department and met with McClellan. Letterman sized up the medical problems and determined what had to be done. On 2 July he asked Hammond for 1,000 hospital tents and 200 ambulances to move the thousands of sick and wounded soldiers. By the end of July the Quartermaster General had sent the required tents and ambulances. Letterman changed the soldiers' diet so that fresh vegetables, along with fresh bread, became regular items in their diets. He issued sanitary instructions to site camps in the open and to observe basic field sanitation.

McClellan would later write of Letterman:

I saw immediately that Letterman was the man for the occasion, and at once gave him my unbounded confidence. In our long and frequent interviews upon the subject of his duties, I was most strongly impressed by his accurate knowledge of his work—the clear and perfectly practical nature of his views and the thorough unselfishness of his character. He had but one thing in view—the best possible organization of his Department—and that, not that he might gain credit or promotion by the results of his work, but that he might do all in his power to diminish the inevitable sufferings of the soldiers and increase the efficiency of the Army. . . . I never met with his superior in power of organization and executive ability.

In his instructions, Hammond authorized Letterman to deal directly with the U.S. Army's medical purveyors in New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington for everything he considered necessary. Letterman used this authority freely, and his army obtained those medicines and supplies needed for the care and treatment of the sick and wounded. This was no simple thing; the Union Army in the Civil War was overrun with bureaucratic control and obstructionism. Many of the War Department's

powerful bureau chiefs—and the Surgeon General was one—guarded their prerogatives of power from any infringement and often retained to themselves the right to approve even the simplest requisitions from the field armies. Unlike most of his colleagues at the Army staff level, however, Hammond granted his trusted subordinate full use of his own prerogatives as Surgeon General so that Letterman in the field and not some Washington bureaucrat could decide what was needed to accomplish the assigned mission.

While still on the Peninsula and after little more than a month as medical director, Letterman prepared and McClellan approved the Army of the Potomac's Special Order No. 147 of 2 August 1862 that laid the foundations for the organization and operation of ambulances in the Union Army. Letterman had already witnessed at first hand the disorganization and rampant misuse and mismanagement of the field ambulances under the Quartermaster Corps and field commanders. Moreover, he realized that medical officers could not provide immediate control of the ambulances during battle when their full attention had to be focused on treating the wounded. Hence he devised a system that placed the ambulances, horses and equipment under "other officers, appointed for that especial purpose" who could respond quickly to the demands of the medical officers. In today's Army, members of the Medical Service Corps are those "other officers" who continue to carry out the duties that Letterman's reforms established so many years ago.

Letterman's new system was barely off the drawing board and only partly operational when it confronted the major test at Antietam. Letterman later wrote of those problems:

It is well to remember that no system devised by man can be *perfect*, and that no such system, even if it existed, could be carried out perfectly by human agency. Calling to mind the fact that the ambulance system, imperfect as it may be found, could not be fully put into practice—remembering the magnitude of the engagement, the length of time the battle lasted, and the obstinacy with which it was contested—it affords me much gratification to state that so few instances of apparently unnecessary suffering were found to exist after that action and that the wounded were removed from that sanguinary field in so careful and expeditious a manner.

After Antietam Letterman established a field hospital system that would properly care for the sick and wounded. In October 1862 he revamped the medical supply system and fleshed out the field hospital structure, both of which would be continually refined throughout the war. In four short months, from July through October 1862, Letterman set the foundation for the complete rebuilding of the organization and administration of the Union Army's entire field medical system. After the war he wrote:

It will be perceived that the ambulance system, with that of supplies and of field hospitals, were ordered as essential parts of that new organization from which, I earnestly hoped, the wounded and sick would receive more careful attendance and more skilful treatment.

His hope, indeed, became a reality.

The catalogue of Letterman's reforms and innovations is too long to recite. However, it should be noted that he paid special attention to preserving the health of the army from the camp diseases which then claimed so many victims. Today we call this preventive medicine and attach a great deal of attention and importance to it. In the 1860s little was known about the causes of such "camp" diseases, but Letterman worked hard to preserve the health of his army because he knew it was critical to success in battle.

Following the battles of Chancellorsville in May 1863 and Gettysburg in July 1863, Letterman reflected on all of the changes that he had instituted so far and codified them in the Army of the Potomac's General Order No. 85, "Ambulance Corps and Ambulance Trains," of 24 August 1863. Congress in

essence took this General Order and modified it into the act of 11 March 1864 that established Letterman's system throughout the Union Army and forever changed the Army Medical Department.

By this time, neither Hammond nor Letterman was in his post, and both were soon to leave the Medical Department and the Army entirely. Relations between Hammond and Stanton had grown increasingly strained until, in August 1863, the Secretary relieved Hammond from his post in Washington and reassigned him as inspector of sanitary conditions in New Orleans. Rather than accept this, the strong-willed Hammond demanded restoration to his office or a court-martial. Stanton accommodated him and preferred trumped-up charges against him that resulted in Hammond's trial, conviction and dismissal from the Army in August 1864.

Letterman was closely associated not only with the discredited Hammond but also with the equally objectionable George McClellan, now resigned from the Army and planning to run against Lincoln in the 1864 Presidential election. "Little Mac" had wholeheartedly supported and encouraged the reforms of Hammond and Letterman while commander of the Army of the Potomac and had done much to assure their success, but anyone associated with him was no friend of Stanton. In December 1863, in failing health, Letterman requested reassignment from his post with the Army of the Potomac. He was a frank and sincere man who was always known as a devoted friend to those who knew him well. It could well be that the injustice visited upon Hammond influenced Letterman's decision to leave the Army of the Potomac. On the other hand, he also could have envisioned a very troublesome future from Hammond's old foes that might have endangered his reforms had he stayed. He would serve as medical inspector of hospitals in the Department of the Susquehanna from January until December 1864, when he finally resigned from the Army to accept a business opportunity in California. The highest rank Letterman achieved during his career was major and surgeon, and he missed out on all of the brevet promotions that were lavished on his subordinates and enemies at the war's end.

When his business career failed, Letterman returned to the practice of medicine in San Francisco in 1866. That same year his *Medical Recollections of the Army of the Potomac* was published and preserves for us his own account of his numerous achievements. The sudden death of his wife in November 1867 was a heavy blow from which he never really recovered. As Letterman's health declined early in 1872, he was visited by a number of friends, including William Hammond, who traveled all the way from New York to see him. Jonathan Letterman died in San Francisco on 15 March 1872 at the age of 47.

Hammond returned to the practice and teaching of medicine in New York after he left the Army. His work in nervous and mental diseases and disorders established his reputation as one of the leading men of medicine in America and set the basis for the emerging specialty of neurology. At the same time he grew wealthy and influential from his large private practice. In the late 1870s, he launched a campaign in Congress to reverse the court-martial conviction of his conduct as Surgeon General. He succeeded and was restored to his rank of brigadier general in August 1879 when his conviction was reversed. He continued his successful career and died in Washington, D.C., on 5 January 1900 at the age of 71.

William Hammond and Jonathan Letterman transformed the Army Medical Department during the Civil War into the world's finest military medical organization. They complemented each other perfectly. Both were men of energy and vision. They saw what was wrong and labored against great obstacles and stubborn opposition to carry out the reforms that they thought were required to save and care for the sick and wounded soldiers. Although their Army careers ended unfortunately, their reforms lived on and have saved the lives of countless American soldiers. Thankfully, many of the concepts which they fought so hard to put into practice continue to guide our Army Medical Department and to serve our soldiers today.

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